He concluded by saying, "If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery. If we look over the dates, places and men for which this honor is claimed, we shall find that not Carolina, but Virginia, not Fort Sumter, but Harpers Ferry, and the arsenal, not Col. Anderson, but John Brown, began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic."

This tour follows the path of John Brown’s Raid from start to finish. Travelers will start at the Kennedy Farmhouse, where Brown and his men stayed in the weeks preceding the attack on Harpers Ferry, and finish at the museum housing the cart that carried John Brown to his execution. The tour will require some moderate walking and admission to various historical sites. Take the path of John Brown and his men as they changed the course of American history and sparked the American Civil War.

THE RAID

On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a party of 18 men into the small town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His plan was to galvanize a major slave rebellion in the South by seizing the estimated 100,000 firearms in the federal arsenal, arming slaves in the surrounding area, and moving south along the Appalachian Mountains, gathering more slaves to his cause and creating an unstoppable force that would crumble the institution forever. To his detriment, Brown overestimated the support he would receive and underestimated the rancor of the local townpeople when their livelihood was threatened. Thirty-six hours later, the plan had failed, and Brown was captured.

THE AFTERMATH

On November 2, 1859, John Brown was found guilty of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, five counts of murder, and inciting an insurrection among Virginia slaves. He was hanged on December 2, 1859 in Charles Town, just a few blocks from the jail and courthouse.

John Brown’s actions and death deepened the divide between the North and South, and he continues to be a controversial figure today. The North found a martyr, and little more than a year later, Union troops marched south singing “John Brown’s Body.” Contemporary luminaries Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman praised the man and his cause. Meanwhile, anger and fear stirred in the South. Feeling it was under attack, the South began building up its militias, paving the way for secession and war.

On May 30, 1881, at the fourteenth anniversary of the founding of Storer College in Harpers Ferry, Frederick Douglass delivered a famous speech on the legacy of John Brown, whom he had known.

"Residence of John Thomas Gibson." PHOTOGRAPH OF THE CHARLES TOWN HOME IN 1898 FROM THE WV & REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER.
John Brown (as "Isaac Smith") rented this farm, now a National Historic Site, in 1857. The property remained in the Allstadt family until the 1923 death of John Thomas Allstadt, well as a tollgate on the Harpers Ferry-Charles Town Turnpike. The property was severely damaged during the Civil War. It was renovated and enlarged to proceed, and the conductor raised the alarm down the line. The support Brown expected from the local slave population never materialized. The next day, John Brown took 18-year-old John Thomas Allstadt, the last survivor of the raid. Restoration work has been done to return the home to its 1859 appearance and is open for tours by appointment only.

STOP 1—KENNEDY FARM

STOP 2—BEALL-AIR

Lewis William Washington, the son of Beall-Air and great-grandnephew of George Washington, inherited several acres of particular interest to John Brown, including a swale from Fincastle the Great and a pair of pistols from Lafayette. John Cook, who served as John Brown’s advance party at Harpers Ferry, befriended Lewis Washington and spent the nights, as well as the slave population at the plantation. During Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, a detachment from his force led by Cook seized the sword and pistols, along with Mr. Washington, and three of his slaves. The hostages were taken to Harpers Ferry by way of Allstadt House and Ordinary, when many hostages were taken. All survived their captivity, and Washington identified Brown to the Marine rescue party and served as witness for the prosecution at his trial. The home is not open to visitors at this time. The ground floor of the home was constructed c.1790, when the land belonged to the Lees. It was enlarged by the Allstadt family c.1820. PHOTO BY JCHLC.

STOP 3—ALLSTADT HOUSE & ORDINARY

Cook stopped at the Allstadt home at he returned to Harpers Ferry and took nine more hostages: John Allstadt, his 18-year-old son, John Thomas, and seven of their slaves. Allstadt operated an annual (or yearly) on the tenancy as well as a tollgate on the Harper Ferry-Charles Town Turnpike. The property remained in the Allstadt family until the 1923 death of John Thomas Allstadt, the last survivor of the raid. Restoration work has been done to return the property to its 1859 appearance. There are interpretive-signs at the site, but it is not yet open to the public.

STOP 4—BESIEGED AND CAPTURED

The raid was initially successful—Brown met little resistance in the town, immediately slashed the telegraph wires, and detained a B&O train passing through. The first casualty of the raid was Hayward Stough, a free black man and railroad employee. For unclear reasons, Brown later allowed the train to proceed, and the conductor raised the alarm down the line. The support Brown expected from the local slave population never materialized. The next day, local militia and townspeople surrounded the arsenal, and President Buchanan ordered a company of Marines under Col. Robert E. Lee to march on Harpers Ferry. Brown, realizing he was trapped, took nine of his hostages and moved into the engine house, now known as John Brown’s Fort. On the 18th, Lee sent Lt. J.E.B. Stuart to negotiate a surrender, but Brown refused. The Marines battened down the doors of the engine house, and in 3 minutes the raid was over. A total of 17 people died during the raid: 10 of Brown’s raiders, 2 slaves, 1 Marine, and 4 townspeople, including the mayor.

STOP 5—JAILED

John Brown and his raiders were taken to the Charles Town jail, which was torn down in 1919. It sat diagonally across from the courthouse, where the post office now sits. Brown was beaten by L.T. Head Green during his capture and requested a delay for his trial due to injury, which was not granted. He received medical treatment while in jail and was carried to court on a stretcher. He refused house arrest and spent his time believing the cause of abolition through letter-writing and interviews with journalists. While incarcerated he also developed a friendship with his jailer, John Avis.

STOP 6—THE TREASON TRIAL IN CHARLES TOWN

Despite the fact that the raid happened on federal land, Governor Henry Wise ordered that the men be tried in Virginia. The trial began on October 27, just 9 days after Brown captured, and ended with the sentence of hanging on November 2. Richard Parker was judge. The defense, which was provided by the state, was led by witnesses, and Brown himself did not testify. Henry Cockrell defended the defense’s closing remarks, arguing that Brown could not be found guilty of treason against a state of which he was not a resident, that he had not personally killed anyone, and that no slaves had rebelled. The jury deliberated for only 45 minutes before issuing a verdict of guilty. Before sentencing, Brown made the now famous statement, “Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, IYet it be done.” The Charles Town courthouse was severely damaged during the Civil War. It was renovated and enlarged after the war and is a working courthouse, open to the public.